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SUBJECT: NEXT STEPS FOR THE FREEDOM AGENDA IN KUWAIT

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[O](#). 05 KUWAIT 646 - ISLAMISTS IN KUWAIT: CONTOURS OF
A GROWING INFLUENTIAL FORCE

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reason 1.4 (d)

[1](#). (S/NF) Summary: Over the last year, Kuwait has implemented two of the three key elements of the Freedom Agenda strategy that we described in May 2005 (05 Kuwait 2091). These were: women's registration for and participation in national elections and the passage of a new press and publications law. Kuwait also passed important electoral reform legislation, a top priority for pro-reform advocates here. Given these historic changes, priority should now be placed on consolidating Kuwait's democratic advances by 1) helping political associations become more effective, 2) supporting women's full integration into the political system, and 3) encouraging responsible youth activism. A key aspect of this approach should be sponsoring training programs to help Kuwaiti political activists develop better leadership, organization, strategic planning, and public relations skills so they can more effectively advocate their views and participate in the political process. This approach would benefit the less organized liberal political and civil society organizations and serve as a counterbalance to rising Islamist influence.

[2](#). (S/NF) The third element of the Freedom Agenda strategy outlined in 2005 was the legalization of political parties. While political party creation should be a long-term goal, (and is for most Kuwaiti politicians), we now recommend that we not push for the legalization of political parties before the 2010 parliamentary elections. With Kuwait already in

the lead position in the Gulf in terms of political openness, legalization of political parties now would likely increase anti-democratic aspects of Islamist influence and further undermine government efficiency. We should instead work with local partners to encourage implementation of measures to strengthen democratic processes in Kuwait, such as regulations on campaign finance and reforms to improve electoral transparency and reduce government corruption. This approach will help address three major obstacles to further meaningful reform in Kuwait: political apathy, social conservatism, and corruption. While Kuwait has made significant progress over the last two years, social and political attitudes change slowly and require a patient, measured approach on our part. We will continue to use all the tools of diplomacy to pursue the Freedom Agenda in Kuwait -- MEPI grants, IVLP visits, media outreach, educational exchange programs, and our close daily interactions with political and civil society actors in Kuwait. End Summary.

A Watershed Year

¶3. (SBU) 2006 was a watershed year in Kuwait's democratic development. In January, following the death of long-time Amir Shaykh Jaber Al-Ahmed, former Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah became Amir through a constitutional process in which Parliament played a prominent role. In March, Parliament passed a new press and publications law that removed a ban on licensing new dailies. In May, the Constitutional Court revoked a 1979 law restricting public gatherings. Later that month, after reaching an impasse with pro-reform parliamentarians over electoral reform, the Amir exercised his constitutional right to dissolve Parliament and called new elections for June. Women participated both as

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candidates and voters in the elections for the first time in Kuwait's history. Pro-reform candidates won a landslide victory, capturing a majority of seats in the 65-member Parliament, thanks in part to the support of a grassroots, pro-reform movement that emerged in support of electoral reform. Confronted with this call for reform, the Prime Minister removed two ministers accused of corruption from the new Cabinet and supported electoral reform legislation, which was passed in July. Pro-reform, opposition MPs formed a new 34-member Reform Bloc in October and agreed to pursue a common legislative agenda, focusing primarily on fighting corruption and implementing reforms. However, tensions between opposition MPs persist, cooperation has been inconsistent, and proposals to provide more benefits to Kuwaiti citizens have threatened to further divide the opposition and distract Parliament from a reform agenda.

Rethinking Kuwait's Freedom Agenda Priorities

¶4. (S/NF) Given these historic developments, a review of the next steps for our Freedom Agenda priorities in Kuwait is appropriate. We believe emphasis should now be placed on consolidating and extending Kuwait's democratic gains by 1) helping political associations become more effective, 2) supporting women's full integration into the political system, and 3) encouraging responsible youth activism. As civil society organizations develop, they will be better able to advocate for meaningful political reforms. If adopted without necessary preparation and development of civil society, additional political reforms, such as legalizing political parties in the near term or allowing Parliament to choose the Prime Minister, will likely only exacerbate existing political problems, contribute to sectarian tensions, increase the influence of more organized Islamist groups, and further undermine government effectiveness. The approach we outline would help counterbalance non-democratic aspects of Islamist influence in Kuwait. While not always the case, civil society organizations in Kuwait tend to be more liberal and inclusive than Islamist organizations and,

with adequate support and training, can serve as effective advocates for a wider range of public policy issues. This will be particularly important as local associations assess the impact of recent electoral reforms on their political strategies.

¶5. (S/NF) Recent improvements in communication and coordination between ideologically disparate political groups both inside and outside Parliament suggest that Kuwait's political system is developing greater sophistication. The approach outlined above would encourage this process. But we should be realistic about how quickly or how deeply Kuwait is ready to change. Three obstacles will continue to slow further democratization: political apathy, social conservatism, and corruption. The most popular issues -- those that motivate political activism -- still tend to relate to government handouts and many Kuwaitis view their elected representatives' primary role as obtaining even more benefits for them personally or for their group. For Kuwait's democracy to grow, it must move beyond an overwhelmingly familial, tribal, sectarian, and patronage-based political culture to one that is more inclusive and issues-based. This will not happen overnight. As President Bush has said, it is a "generational challenge," and our expectations should be measured in those terms.

Helping Political Associations Become More Effective

¶6. (S/NF) The majority of Kuwait's political associations are organized around narrow familial, sectarian, and ideological lines, and lack the structure and strategic leadership necessary to effectively and responsibly engage in the political process. There are a few notable exceptions. The Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), the political arm of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood, has a well-developed organizational structure, a clear political agenda, and a dynamic leadership. While much smaller, the Islamic National Consensus Movement (INCM), an inclusive, but predominantly Shi'a political association, has a similarly well-developed structure, leadership, and agenda, and excels at strategic planning. Other groups, most notably the more underdeveloped liberal political associations, have expressed an interest in improving their organizational structure and strategic planning process, but lack the necessary skills, and have far less popular political support. Helping them develop these skills through regional and in-country training programs will allow them to engage more meaningfully in the political process. This skills-based approach, partnering with local organizations, should be the key element of our overall

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Freedom Agenda strategy in Kuwait.

¶7. (S/NF) The specific skill areas in which local political and civil society leaders have identified training needs include: leadership and management; skillful and effective negotiation; political survey methodology; strategic planning; political organization; public relations; public sector advocacy; public speaking; and organizing grassroots activism. This skills-based approach has three key advantages. First, skills-based training is gender inclusive and can be extended to all local political associations and civil society organizations. Second, the training will largely benefit less organized liberal and moderate groups and help balance the influence of Islamists in the next parliamentary elections. Finally, this approach will be less immediately threatening to the Al-Sabah leadership than pushing for the legalization of political parties or other intrusive political reforms. This reduces the likelihood of a near-term destabilizing political crisis that would work against democratization.

¶8. (S/NF) Many reformists, particularly liberals, have backed off from active support for legalization of political parties, recognizing that Kuwait's political system is still

underdeveloped and that the premature emergence of political parties will likely only exacerbate existing political problems and increase the influence of Islamists, who are better prepared to capitalize on a party system now. However, there are some who do advocate a near-term push for the legalization of parties. One woman activist raised this issue in her meeting with Secretary Rice January 17, cautioning that legalization should be accompanied by restrictions on religious elements in the parties. The Secretary noted that the experience of governing could

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moderate the Islamist political platform over time, given the need to respond to constituent concerns.

¶9. (S/NF) Given the specific circumstances here in Kuwait, we assess that U.S. efforts should not concentrate on the establishment of political parties prior to the 2010 parliamentary elections. Rather, we should focus on laying the groundwork, supporting the development and improvement of Kuwait's democratic processes in cooperation with local partners. Some of the reforms suggested by our contacts include the implementation of campaign finance regulations, stricter anti-corruption controls, and measures to improve electoral transparency. In this way, when political parties are legalized, they will be able to contribute constructively to the political process rather than serve as mouthpieces for narrow sectarian or ideological views, or precipitate a premature political crisis with the government that could roll back hard-won gains. We should also continue to engage local media to encourage higher standards and more responsible journalism that contributes to political understanding rather than enflames public opinion.

Supporting Women's Full Political Integration

¶10. (S/NF) Since winning the right to vote in 2005, women have emerged as an influential political force and now represent a majority of voters. Women participating in the June 2006 elections helped to shape election issues and broke conservative social taboos. Although none of the 27 female candidates was elected, most women viewed the elections as a success that demonstrated women's political potential in Kuwait. Recognizing the importance of women voters, parliamentarians, including Islamists, are now responding to and advocating their female constituents' concerns in Parliament. Moving forward, the key will be to capitalize on these successes by helping women integrate more fully into the political system and prepare for the next parliamentary elections.

¶11. (S/NF) This can be achieved in three ways. First, we should help Kuwaiti women learn lessons from the recent elections. With already approved MEPI funding, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) is conducting several public surveys on the elections and will share the results with local NGOs and political associations. These and other similar surveys will help identify ways women's rights activists can more effectively encourage Kuwaiti women to participate in the political process. Second, we should help women learn how to overcome traditional social barriers to effectively advocate their political views at the local, national, and regional levels. This could be done in part by drawing on the experience of female politicians and women's rights activists from other Arab countries. Third, local women's groups should be actively targeted for inclusion in the skills-based training programs suggested above. It is

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important that women in Kuwait are incorporated to as great an extent as possible into existing political organizations and do not become marginalized in female-only activist groups outside the political mainstream. (Once again, it appears to us that the Muslim Brothers are in the lead in organizing like-minded women, after getting past their deep opposition

to women's political rights.)

¶12. (S/NF) There has been some discussion in Kuwait of the merits of a quota system for women in the Parliament. Some women have argued that temporarily setting aside a fixed number of seats for women is the only way to ensure they have national representation, at least in the short-term. In a recent meeting with U/S Dobriansky, noted women's rights activist Dr. Rola Dashti suggested the election law be amended to require candidates to run on four person "lists" and to stipulate that one of the four must be a woman. In her view, this would ensure that women were elected to Parliament. While a quota system has worked in other countries, in Kuwait it could cause other groups, like the politically under-represented Shi'a minority, to demand their own quota. For now, there is no consensus on the issue even among women activists. We see no reason to take a position on this issue now, but will follow it closely as proposals evolve.

Encouraging Responsible Youth Activism

¶13. (S/NF) Young, politically active men and women are another demographic of emerging political importance in Kuwait. These youth activists, many of whom got started in politics through the National Union of Kuwaiti Students (NUKS), played an influential role in the pro-reform, anti-corruption rallies earlier this year and the subsequent elections in June. They represent a younger generation of Kuwaitis with an active interest in their country's political future and have infused the political system here with new life. Like Kuwaiti women, the key now is to help these young activists build on their successes, develop their political skills, and integrate more fully into the political system.

¶14. (S/NF) This can be accomplished by working more closely with local student organizations, especially the student parties at Kuwait University, to develop their political awareness and advocacy skills, and to identify future leaders for International Visitor Programs. It is also important to engage with NUKS-U.S., the organization's largest and most active overseas branch. Many of Kuwait's liberal political leaders have emerged from NUKS-U.S. and some of the leading youth activists have cited their involvement in NUKS-U.S. and volunteer activities in U.S. domestic political campaigns as the impetus for their political activism in Kuwait.

¶15. (S/NF) As part of this effort, we should accelerate efforts to encourage Kuwaitis to study in the U.S. We can also develop training programs similar to the ones outlined above specifically for students and recent graduates, equipping them with the tools they need to better understand political issues and effectively voice their opinions. We are also developing a cadre of young Kuwaitis who understand open political systems through our many exchange programs, including YES and Fulbright. These exchanges are proven, powerful tools of influence and we continue to encourage major expansion of these programs as an integral part of our overall Freedom Agenda strategy in the Middle East.

The Islamist Factor

¶16. (S/NF) Helping other political groups develop better organizational and advocacy skills can to a certain extent balance Islamist gains. However, Islamists will continue to exert considerable political influence for the foreseeable future given regional political trends and Islamists' superior organization and appeal to what is still a quite conservative Kuwaiti public. Islamists here, as elsewhere in the region, have significant anti-democratic elements among their leadership and embedded in some aspects of their ideology. Moreover, there are considerable differences among and even within Kuwait's Islamist organizations, differences blurred by the very term "Islamist." In reality, Kuwaiti Islamists run the gamut from moderate, pragmatic and even liberal to hard-core Salafis supportive of Al-Qaeda's global

jihadist ideology. Increasingly sophisticated in their approach, the Islamist message is often carefully calibrated to its audience, whether Western, regional, or local.

¶17. (S/NF) Islamist dominance of the opposition landscape here should inform our approach, but not deter our objective

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of pursuing long-term democratic change. There are some encouraging factors. While we may have concerns about their activities outside of the country, Islamists have operated within Kuwait's political system peacefully for decades. Many Islamist groups here have also demonstrated a willingness to work with other political groups, including liberals and Shi'a, and strongly support political reform. There is little convincing evidence to suggest they will suddenly depart from this strategy. However, they are in the game for the long term, and in the long term, we believe their interests will sharply diverge from U.S. interests.

¶18. (S/NF) In the case of Kuwait, the key issue will be pursuing gradual change, with both institutional and cultural aspects of democratization moving forward in parallel. That way, as Islamist politicians gain more responsibility and power, they will be forced to respond to an institutional and cultural environment that rejects the anti-democratic elements of their ideology. This can only happen over time. If Kuwait is pushed toward rapid institutional change without a corresponding democratic cultural development, Kuwait is more likely to descend into a series of political crises which anti-democratic elements are best positioned to exploit. Now is the time to consolidate and build on the gratifying gains for democracy of recent years. From a tactical view, our approach will continue to be guided by a philosophy of "partnership and programs" -- partnering always with local organizations and jointly developing practical programs to fit their needs.

¶19. (C/NF) All our Freedom Agenda reporting since 2005 is available under the "Freedom Agenda" hot topic link on our classified website.

For more reporting from Embassy Kuwait, visit:
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